

Arts programs running out of classrooms City's cultural office looks for innovative solutions.

Lety Laurel EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Publication Date : February 9, 2005

The kitchen isn't exactly the best place to hold dance lessons, but that space at the Garza Community Center is among the best that the Parks and Recreation Department can offer. That's because out of the 26 community centers scattered throughout the city, only eight are suitable for **cultural** programming such as dance, music and art.

"We make lemonade out of lemons," said Mona Lisa Montgomery, recreation services supervisor. In 2003, city **cultural** programming was on the chopping block as the City Council decided what the city could forgo for the next budget year.

The classes offered to children and seniors citywide survived the ax after dancers and other participants lined up at City Hall, armed with their costumes and protests. But it came at a cost. The programming that was offered free for more than half a century was asked to generate its own revenue.

And that means it's time to find more appropriate arts space for the **cultural** program's 600 participants, Montgomery said.

With gyms and tile floors and rooms without mirrors, the city's existing community centers never were meant to hold almost 100 **cultural** classes, she said.

"Their purpose was not with our program in mind, and we understand that," she said. "We were just a side item that was free, so it was just something extra that the city offered. But when the city decided we would begin charging for **cultural** activities, one of the problems with that is we need space appropriate for a fine arts program.

"You can't teach music in a gym with people playing basketball."

But program participants make do with what they have. Gretchen Jimenez, a senior recreation specialist who teaches ballet and hip-hop, said it just requires a bit of compromise and innovation. For her ballet class in the kitchen, they push the tables against the wall and bring in portable ballet barres, which they line up diagonally to fit. For her larger hip-hop class, she squeezes in a few extra people by turning sideways. While the Bertha Almaguer Dance Studio, the city's only specialized dance studio, offers a permanent sound system for music, she has to bring in a portable stereo.

"We don't view it as a negative. It's space," Jimenez said. "The kids and I both forget that it's in a kitchen. We're just there to work hard.

"I don't care where I'm at as long as I'm able to teach these kids and they can learn dance and enjoy themselves."

At the top of the wish list, organizers said they hope to one day have an arts center with art studios, soundproofed music rooms, mirrored dance rooms and a theater seating 300-plus. A five-to 10-year arts plan, called the **Cultural Collaborative** and prepared by the city's Office of **Cultural** Affairs, outlines such a facility as a long-range goal.

Felix Padron, director of the Office of **Cultural** Affairs, said the overall need heard in public meetings about the arts was for more space.

"That's what we heard, we need more," he said. "I think it's critical to seriously consider creating a **cultural** component or incorporating one either as part of existing facilities or if they are going to create more parks facilities, they have to consider incorporating **cultural** components through that."

The report showed that in the area of public dollars, San Antonio's per capita funding for the arts and culture is considerably less than the national average and lags behind Dallas, Austin and Houston.

"If more funding was available, then perhaps there would be more programs available," he said. "I think that's where communities are being shortchanged, if you will."

But until then, parks and recreation officials are appealing to businesses, schools and anyone else who can offer them more appropriate space for free. Already one business has signed up, and organizers hope there will be more to come.

"The program could be so much more for the public at a very affordable rate if we had more facilities in the proper atmosphere," Montgomery said. "Good things are already in place, but we just want to make them better."

The dance program was the first **cultural** program offered in the city. Bertha Almaguer created it in 1935. Music was added to the department's **cultural** programming in 2003. The eventual goal is to have a city-sponsored youth band.

Janet Martin, recreation services manager, said she'd like more community centers and recreation in the northwest and northeast parts of the city.

"There's a need for just recreational facilities in general," she said.

That echoes the needs outlined in the **Cultural Collaborative**, and Padron said he's optimistic that formulating the plan is a step in the right direction.

"I think without **cultural** (programming) and the arts, the soul of the city is not there," Padron said. "San Antonio is a city that is obviously the eighth largest city in the nation and is recognized nationally and internationally as being unique as a culturally rich community, which leads me to believe that it makes total sense to continue to invest in that attribute."

llaurel@express-news.net